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### Review Of "The Tempest" By W. Shakespeare And Performed By Broadhurst Theatre

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## Performance Review

### *The Tempest*

*The Tempest*. By William Shakespeare. Broadhurst Theatre, New York. 24 November 1995.

George C. Wolfe's fascinating production of *The Tempest* at the Broadhurst Theatre--the Broadway version of an enormously successful run for the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park--raises some difficult questions about the relation between the Shakespearean text and post-colonial politics.



In spite of its clear and creative attempts to disrupt both Prospero's and Shakespeare's control of the island, the production indulges a degree of nostalgia for both of them. While watching the wedding masque for Miranda and Ferdinand, Patrick Stewart's Prospero moves downstage, lays on his back, closes his eyes, and begins rapturously fingering the sand that covers the stage. What unfolds is clearly for his personal pleasure as much as it is a wedding present: Brazilian stilt-walkers circle the bride and groom as gigantic camped-up versions of Iris, Ceres, and Juno; Bunraku puppets appear in a wonderful dance, joined not only by Miranda and Ferdinand but--somewhat stiffly--by Prospero himself. The masque allows Prospero and his audience to enjoy an apparently carefree celebration of cultural diversity that momentarily displaces the production's provocative exploration of colonialism. By the miracle of his own fantasy and stagecraft, Prospero can dance along with the inhabitants of the island he so nervously and brutally controls.

Prospero's hold over the audience is strengthened by Stewart's rapport with Carrie Preston's wonderful Miranda, a tomboy in knee-breeches. At one point, after Prospero has chastised the couple yet again, he turns away from them to hide not jealousy but laughter; meanwhile they collapse giggling behind his back. That single moment both acknowledges and diffuses the sexual tensions that attend Miranda's long sojourn on a desert island with Stewart's Prospero. Beautifully refurbishing *The Tempest's* well-worn preoccupations with incest and daughterly obedience, Wolfe, Stewart, and Preston gave Prospero and Miranda an emotional power and freshness that profoundly complicates the production's equally powerful meditations on the colonial enterprise.

Patrick Stewart's fame, an essential component to the production's overwhelming popularity, rests upon his reputation as the man who can pilot the crew of *The Next Generation's* starship safely through uncharted worlds of inter-species hostility and cooperation. He is, in other words, a much-loved symbol for the hope that the future will hold a place for European commanders no matter who else is granted membership in the Federation. He is also a fine actor; it is a strength of this production and of Stewart's performance that they leave both the fantasy of hegemony and critique of hegemony intact. When Prospero abjures his magic arts and steps forward to speak his epilogue, the master loses his power, the house lights come up slowly, the backdrop lifts to reveal the theatre's bare walls, and Patrick Stewart emerges "in person," in the figure of a nervous actor utterly beguiling to audiences who know him only from the safe space of televised performance. His staging of vulnerability, in other words, while it enacts the all-important stepping down from command, simultaneously engaged the audience in another level of hero worship. Prospero leaves the island, but the stage remains firmly in the possession of Patrick Stewart, and star-struck audiences remain complicit in the fantasy of Prospero as the master who controls theatrical space.

Stewart's immense appeal aside, however, the production makes some brilliant efforts to pull [End Page 383] [Begin Page 385] theatre away from the European tradition. The opening shipwreck scene relies on actors in traditional costume, accompanied by a prompter. They are supplanted by a team of stilt-walkers waving huge bands of blue fabric; the old Shakespeare is literally washed away by a third-world storm. Similarly, a very strong performance by Aunjanue Ellis established Ariel's obedience as a complex negotiation. Played as a kind of American slave, as womanly rather than androgynous, Ariel resists her master's commands even while she seems to take pleasure in her own skill at performing them. No passive spirit, Ellis makes a commanding harpy with enormous claws and was especially impressive as she wields masks from a variety of theatrical traditions. Clearly, her smiles were yet another level of masking, behind which she worked out her personal fantasies of power, her desires, and her emotional entanglement with an intense, passionate, and cruel Prospero. Ellis's Ariel make the play's effects work not just as Prospero's magic but as her own.

Dressed in cast-off Milanese breeches and a shaved red skull, Teagle F. Bougere as Caliban is pure rage. He breaks through the role of the plantation slave, essentially undaunted by Prospero's threats. This Caliban lies daydreaming when ordered to carry wood, which he picks up only to use as a cudgel. Cuts in the final scene spare him the usual servile apologies. He establishes himself as an autonomous force, able to manipulate Stephano and Trinculo by feigning submission, bitterly frustrated by their imbecility. When released, he joins Ariel in Prospero's cell, which virtually exploded around them. If that final pairing is a stretch for the text--and for audiences that saw Ariel work with Prospero against Caliban--its abruptness adds nicely to the notion that the servants have been biding their time, working out an utterly private freedom.

This welcome sense of alliance against all that Prospero represents breaks down surprisingly in Wolfe's direction of Mario Cantone and Ross Lehmen as Stephano and Trinculo. Although the performances are hilarious and strangely appropriate to the text, they make for troubling sexual politics. Cooing over their latest fashion finds, the swishy, self-deluded pair seem to embody the ruthlessness and the solipsism of the fantasy of power. This linking of gay comedy and colonial [End Page 385] exploitation suggests that the production has bought its expansiveness, its astonishing ability to allow Prospero, Ariel, Caliban and Miranda their simultaneous appeal, partly at the price of indulging some tired associations between effeminacy and the waning powers of the West. Like the stilt-walkers who bless the marriage of Ferdinand

and Miranda, the gifted performers who impersonate Betty Davis while planning to sell Caliban ultimately play into the hands of the European Commander whom audiences still crave.

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